

## Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-20

Luke wrote his story of Jesus to the Gentile world. He first sent the story to an official named Theophilus (or “Friend of God”). Though today’s lesson continues a story of the Jews, Theophilus would have recognized his own people in the crowds surrounding John. Even today, there are many who search for answers to their inner turmoil; to their questions about the way the world is. John proclaimed that he was preparing the people to meet the Answer in person. Greek, Jew, American—we all need that hope and assurance.

We live in a society in which millions of people don’t know who Jesus is or that He came to save them. How do you tell the story of Jesus? Can you say, as Luke did, that you have “investigated everything carefully from the beginning” (Luke 1:3)? When you tell the story of the Gospel, is it a personal story?

In Advent we celebrate the second coming of Christ, as well as the first. Luke was willing to tell the story of Christ to his friends, even the skeptical, the unbelieving, the seeking, and the fearful. Are we?

John preached the same message to all of his listeners, tax collectors, soldiers, or religious leaders. God is sending the Messiah. Salvation is at hand.

“Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance....” The repentant tax collector would not only apologize to the people he had cheated, he would stop the cheating. Repentant soldiers stopped bullying the common people. Repentance meant stopping selfish practices and beginning a caring life. Verse 18 says that this was part of the Gospel, the Good News from God.

Do we take our salvation for granted? Do we consider responding to God’s grace? Do we practice repentance by serving instead of being served? These questions require looking honestly into our hearts. What better time to do that than during Advent as we celebrate the coming of our Savior? We have a Helper in the task of examining our own hearts.

The Holy Spirit enables real repentance. As Ephesians records, we are saved for a purpose: “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” In this season of Advent, each Christian has the opportunity to take *repentance* seriously. How will we change in response to God’s call?

### *Is reading the Bible a part of your Advent season?*

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

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Luke 3:1-20

1. Luke, the inspired historian, includes historical contexts (vs. 1-2). Why are these details included in his Gospel account? How are they helpful?
2. Who was John the Baptist? (read Luke 1:5-25; 57-66 for his background and birth) What was his role in respect to Jesus? (vs. 16-17)
3. What question was repeatedly asked of John (vs. 10, vs. 12, vs. 14)? Summarize John’s response.

### For Family Reflection

4. Review vs. 3 of this chapter. Have you received a baptism of repentance? Have you received God’s forgiveness in your baptism? Review Luther’s answer (Small Catechism) to the question “What benefits does Baptism give?”
5. What else do you know about John the Baptist (clothes, lifestyle, location)? See Matthew 3 and Mark 1.
6. Look at the Advent hymns in your hymnal. Do you find any references to John the Baptist? How does John’s message speak to us today?

## Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 7:18-35

John the Baptizer's disciples were following Jesus, witnessing the miracles and listening to His teaching. After collecting their observations, they went to John, who was imprisoned because of his criticism of Herod Antipas and his wife, Herodias.

John sends a question back to Jesus by way of his disciples, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (NIV) Jesus' reply to this question is wonderful for all of us to hear because by it Jesus reassures John that, "Yes! The Messiah has come!"

After John's disciples depart, Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them about John, affirming that John was the one foretold by the prophets who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Then Jesus throws us a curve, saying that the least in the kingdom of God was greater than John. Most believe that what Jesus meant was that John would not live to see this side of the Cross. We are more blessed than John because we have the Cross as our witness to the truth that John preached.

Though they were saved, like us, by grace through faith, John and all believers before him did not have the blessing of seeing exactly how God would accomplish that salvation.

Luke says that those who understood John's baptism of repentance believed Jesus' words, but those who did not accept John also rejected Jesus' words.

Jesus then compares the religious establishment to children who become angry when others do not readily agree with them. They were angry because Jesus and John seemed to reject them and their religious laws and false beliefs about salvation. On the other hand, no matter what Jesus and John had done in their own ministries, the religious leaders could find fault. John and Jesus were different, yet both were rejected out of jealousy and fear.

Today many continue to reject Jesus for similar reasons: fear of turning their lives over to God; wanting to control their own salvation; wanting to control their own lives; to be "beholden" to nobody, even God. People in fact want to be their own gods. As believers, we have a task much like John's—to let people know that the Savior has come and will come again.

***Have you invited a friend to attend a regular Bible study with you?***

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

## Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 7:18-35

1. According to vs. 26-28 how does Jesus affirm the person and message of John?
2. How did John and others know that Jesus was the One sent from God (vs. 22)? How do we know that Jesus is the One sent from God for us?
3. How did different groups react to John's message and Jesus' ministry (vs. 29-30)?

### For Family Reflection

4. Are you greater than John the Baptist (vs. 28)? What makes us great?
5. What eventually happened to John the Baptist (see Mark 6:14-29)?
6. John the Baptist was the last prophet to prepare the way for Jesus. Who are some of the other Old Testament prophets? What was their message? What can we learn from these prophets?

## Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-56

Christians have admired Mary's faith for centuries. She was a teenage girl who seemed to have it all together. Her faith in God was strong. Her trust in Him was amazing. How did she do it? Mary's song of praise to the Lord may hold the answer to our puzzlement over her faithfulness.

Bible commentaries tell us that there are fifteen different Old Testament quotations exalting God in Mary's song. What does that tell us about her? Mary knew God's word. She knew the stories of her ancestors by heart. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets were all familiar people to her. By knowing God's word, Mary knew God. She knew that He could be trusted. He had proved His love and His trustworthiness over and over through the centuries.

Mary's knowledge of God through His word meant that she could accept the greatest challenge of her young life. She could answer the angel's announcement with, "Behold, the bond slave of the Lord..." (vs. 38) because she already knew that God was in control of her destiny.

When we are met with difficult decisions, challenges, and conflicts, how often can we say, "God, do whatever you think is best. I am your servant"? Do we often fear that God will not take care of us or our loved ones? Can any of us honestly claim to trust as Mary trusted? Which of us has exalted in our God as Mary did upon arriving at Elizabeth's home? How did these women do it? Knowing God's word made a tremendous difference in their lives.

Verse 41 tells us one more thing—"and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." As we seek to trust and obey God's will in our lives every day, the study of His word is imperative as is prayer. It is only by God's enabling that we can turn to Him in every need and in every joy, trusting Him for unfailing direction and care.

As we schedule through the busy Christmas season and into the coming new year, will we go so far as to schedule a time marked "no cancellation" to spend with our Lord and Savior? If you do, you will never regret it.

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## Fourth Sunday in Advent

Luke 1:39-56

1. Who was the baby in Elizabeth's womb? Why did the baby leap in Mary's presence?
2. Who was the Baby in Mary's womb? What title does Elizabeth give to the expected Child? According to vs. 41 what Presence filled and directed Elizabeth?
3. Why is Mary referred to as "blessed"? Was there anything special about Mary as a person? (see Luke 1:26-38)
4. Read Mary's song of praise (vs. 46-55). Why is it often called the "Magnificat"? Where do we find it in our worship liturgy?

### For Family Reflection

5. Advent is a time of humility. Where do we see humility in Mary and Elizabeth? How do we humbly prepare for Christmas?
6. Advent is a time for joy. Where do we see joy expressed by Mary and Elizabeth? What is the source of their joy? What is the source of our joy? How is our Advent joy expressed?

## First Sunday After Christmas

Luke 2:22-40

As Americans, we are an impatient group, especially when it comes to satisfying our own wants. We not only want to see the process of gaining our satisfaction begin, we want to see it fulfilled—now. Some of the heroes of the Bible are a little hard to understand from our perspective.

Today, we read of Simeon and Anna. These two devoted followers of God waited almost all of their lives to see the Savior come. It was their greatest desire. God granted them a special knowledge that the time was close. When they saw Jesus, the Babe, they joyfully glorified God for allowing them to see the Messiah. They did not see salvation won on the cross, nor the resurrection, nor the beginning of the church, yet they were confident and at peace, even though these things were not yet complete.

The hardest part of trusting God is genuinely believing that what He promises will happen, whether we see it or not. Simeon and Anna did not question God's faithfulness, love, or ability. Trusting God as their Advocate, rather than trusting themselves for the answers to all of life's questions, meant that they could know peace. As we hear in worship, "May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds..." That trusting peace meant that they did not have to say, "We'll wait to see if this child turns out to be the Messiah." They understood that they were not in control of the situation, and that this was appropriate because God was in control.

God is still in control of the situation, no matter what it is. Many of us today face financial trouble or even failure; we endure the cancer of a loved one; we look at our world and wonder how it could get worse. Through it all, God is able to grant us the peace of knowing that He is better able than we to rule in our lives.

We can know the peace of Simeon and Anna and know that God is trustworthy. It means leaning on God instead of ourselves. Through Christ it can be a reality. Seeking Him as He stands right beside us is the answer. It isn't a simplistic answer, as some claim, but it is simple. By the power of the Holy Spirit it is possible.

### *Is reading the Bible a part of your Christmas celebration?*

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

## First Sunday After Christmas

Luke 2:22-40

1. Review Luke 2:1-21. What had happened in Bethlehem? How had the shepherds responded? How had Mary responded?
2. How long after Jesus' birth did the temple visit take place? Why did Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple?
3. Who was Simeon? How did he react to Jesus' arrival? Why would a Baby cause such a profound response? What can we learn from Simeon?
4. Who was Anna? How did she respond to Jesus' arrival? What can we learn from Anna?

### **For Family Reflection**

5. Where in our worship service do we sing Simeon's song? What do we call that song? Why is it an appropriate response for us?
6. Mary and Joseph establish a "routine" in Nazareth (vs. 39-40). We get back to routines after Christmas. Should our life ever be routine believing that Jesus was born for us?